

## **The Vietnam Project at Texas Tech University**

**James R. Reckner, Ph.D.**

**Director**

Please permit me to begin by noting the passing of a good friend of Vietnam and the Vietnamese people, Professor Doug Pike. I know he has attended your conferences in the past, and that many of you knew him. I also was honored to be within his circle of friends, and worked with him on a daily basis for the last years of his life.

Few people I have known in life were so dedicated to his research; so committed to better understanding the Vietnamese people, their past, present and future. I should add that right up until the day he suffered the stroke that eventually led to his passing, he worked at the office seven days a week, reading the mass of materials he received every day, analyzing that material, and making acerbic observations that would appear in his journal, *Indochina Chronology*. He didn't take vacations, as they took him away from his true love. And who, willingly, would be separated from his love?

I make no pretense: I cannot—and never will be able to—match him. His accumulated knowledge gained through more than forty years of study, and his tremendous insights were of remarkable value, whether they dealt with analyzing the Viet Cong in his first work, or the People's Army of Vietnam, or more recently his assessments of the inner workings of the Hanoi government in recent years.

In his passing, the Vietnamese people have lost a great friend. And so have I.

I have been asked to speak about a topic concerning which I do have some special knowledge: the Vietnam Project at Texas Tech University.

### **Inception and Initial Years of the Vietnam Project**

In May of 1989, a group of Vietnam veterans from the Texas Tech University faculty and from the West Texas community met to discuss what they might do, in a positive way, about their Vietnam experience. At that meeting we decided to form a "Vietnam Archive" and to begin collecting materials from West Texas veterans, so there would at least be something available relating to the war for students at Texas Tech to study.

The first material donated to the Vietnam Archive was a set of letters written by a young Navy hospital corpsman serving with the U.S. Marines in the northern part of South Vietnam. Perhaps symptomatic of the conflicted nature of that war, when the individual who wrote those letters returned to the United States, recovering from a serious wound he suffered there, he became involved in the anti-war organization, "Vietnam Veterans Against the War."

### **Missions of the Vietnam Center**

Our little group of Vietnam veterans soon discovered that a lot of important materials were available, on microfilm. However, the Vietnam Archive at that point had no income, and no mechanism with which to raise funds. Therefore, we petitioned the

Board of Regents of Texas Tech, which in November 1989 formally established the Vietnam Center at Texas Tech University, with the dual missions of:

- a.) Funding and guiding the development of the Vietnam Archive; and
- b.) Encouraging continued study of all aspects of the American Vietnam experience.

The Board of Regents designated the Vietnam Center, and its component Vietnam Archive, as a unit of the College of Arts & Sciences. This is particularly important, as it established the Vietnam Archive in a different chain of command from the University Libraries. This meant that interested individuals and organizations might fund the Archive separately from the University Libraries, and meant that we were able to maintain an exclusive focus on Vietnam. Had the Archive been funded under the Library, it naturally would have had to compete with a hundred other areas of study for funding. And it would thus have suffered.

As a result of this arrangement, I am pleased to say, we have remained very focused. The Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech now has the most complete microfilm research collection relating to Vietnam, as we have dedicated nearly a half-million dollars exclusively to acquisitions in this field. At this point, we believe our collection is more complete even than the Library of Congress. We now hold Vietnamese newspapers, as one small example, back to World War I. Some time ago, an official from one of the ministries in Hanoi was touring our facility. After reviewing our holdings, he turned to me and rather shyly said, "Some day we will have to come here to study our own

country!" Given the shortage of funding for preservation of archives in Hanoi, that is a distinct possibility.

But during the first several years of its existence, the operations of the Vietnam Center and Vietnam Archive were very low key. Though the Board of Regents had established the organization, they had not funded it. Indeed, for the first several years I personally funded the operation, acted as director, and also as secretary and fund-raiser.

It was not until 1996 that the Center received a special line item in the State of Texas budget. Since then, the State of Texas has been very generous in its support, and has continued supporting our project despite the current financial crisis which saw a \$38 billion deficit for the current biennium. Additionally, since 2001, the Vietnam Center has received federal funding for a project to put all of its non-copyrighted materials on-line in what we call "The Virtual Vietnam Archive" project. We are now discussing follow-on projects with our supporters on Capitol Hill, and hope that this federal funding might continue indefinitely.

The Vietnam Center continues to receive strong support from the American Vietnam veteran community, and from some in the Vietnamese-American community. In 1990, we established a "National Advisory Council," for which the late Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr., served as chairman during the last ten years of his life. The current chairman is Ambassador Douglas "Pete" Peterson. The Vietnamese representative on that Council, since 1990, has been Ambassador Bui Diem.

## **The National Advisory Council**

But the truth of the matter is we can no longer rely on the older generation for support, as the inevitable toll of age and time has meant that most members of that original Council have passed away: Admiral Zumwalt, William Colby, Bill Bundy, Douglas Pike are all gone. And General Westmoreland has withdrawn from public life. Of the original Council, only Ambassador Bui Diem remains active.

## **Outreach to Vietnam**

Over the years, the missions assigned by the Board of Regents have remained our core activities: preservation of the record of the American Vietnam experience, and encouraging continuing study. These are the activities that attract the bulk of our funding. However, in recent years we have expanded our scope of activities to embrace Vietnamese academia.

Beginning with a visit to Vietnam in 1998, Texas Tech University has signed seven memoranda of understanding for cooperation with universities in Hanoi, Hue, Ho Chi Minh City, and Can Tho, and with one community college: Kien Giang Community College in Rach Gia.

## **Scholarships**

With the universities we have worked to assist students financially by providing a few hundred small scholarships of \$100 each to help students finance their education.

We settled on this approach because we feel it offers the most impact for the limited funds we have available. To bring one student from Vietnam to Texas Tech for two years costs more than \$30,000. The same amount could provide 300 Vietnamese students with the equivalent of about a year's tuition. So, we opted for the direct assistance in Vietnam.

Our criteria for scholarships are quite simple: To receive the scholarships, students must have very distinct financial need, must show academic promise, and must be nominated by the rector or vice rector of the university involved. We do not specify any particular discipline, and we have no particular agenda other than helping young people obtain their education.

For these scholarships the Vietnam Center depends upon donations and grants. We have a 100% flow-through rate, with no administrative expenses. Every dollar donated reaches students in Vietnam. Period.

And how do we ensure that it reaches the students? Easy. We hand-deliver the cash in envelopes directly to the students when we meet them at their university. If universities are reluctant for us to meet with the students in this way, we simply redirect the money to other universities where the leadership is more open.

## **Research Cooperation**

At another level, the Vietnam Center acts as the hub within Texas Tech University for matching Vietnamese organizations that have specific research needs with researchers that have the necessary skills. And in the case of the community colleges in Vietnam, the Vietnam Center has formed a consortium with community colleges in the US interested in Vietnam in order to assist in developing a community college model appropriate for Vietnam.

Other Vietnam Center-sponsored projects have included one for the transfer of some leather technology to Vietnam. This project was a partnership between Tomas Bata University in the Czech Republic, the US-Asia Environmental Partnership, Nike, the Leather Research Institute at Texas Tech and the Vietnam Center. The project developed a simple method to remove chromium in the off-cuts of leather used in making shoes in Vietnam, thus keeping this deadly element from being deposited into public dumps in Vietnam. An additional benefit of the project is that the other residue from the process proved an effective fertilizer for rice.

When this critical process ran out of public funding, the Vietnam Center intervened and provided sufficient funding for the scientists involved to go to Vietnam and provide a large-scale demonstration of the process for the Vietnamese leather industry in Ho Chi Minh City.

This initial success has led to a follow-on project funded by Asia Foundation for our scientists to provide guidance for the tanning industry about limiting pollution.

This year, too, the Vietnam Center, in partnership with the International Textile Center of Texas Tech and the Texas Department of Agriculture, completed a US Department of Agriculture-funded project to bring Vietnamese textile experts to Texas to learn about Texas cotton, and then followed up with a series of seminars in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City that focused on the business end: methods of purchasing, financing and shipping US cotton to Vietnam.

At the humanitarian level, Texas Tech's Health Sciences Center is helping to develop a master's program for nursing for the University of Medicine and Pharmacy in Ho Chi Minh City, while the Vietnam Center, with technical assistance from the "special education" specialists within our College of Education is helping a very special school in Hanoi to develop and publish a specialized technical handbook of Vietnamese sign language signs used in needlepoint and embroidery.

### **Hoa Sua School and Assistance for Deaf Children**

This school, the Hoa Sua School for the Underprivileged, takes street kids and trains them to become chefs, bakers and restaurant workers. But, more specially, they also take in deaf children, teach them to communicate, and also teach them embroidery and needlepoint, and thus give them an opportunity to succeed in a society which all too often completely marginalizes children with handicaps. This project is very near and dear to my heart as a father and grandfather, and I personally commend it to you. At present, I am seeking a donor or donors to sponsor publication of this specialized sign-

language handbook. The relatively small cost—\$5,500—will enable a great many young Vietnamese kids to succeed. And, as with all Vietnam Center projects of this nature, I can guarantee a 100% flow-through of donations. There will be no deductions at our end for administrative costs, etc. And we will hand-deliver the money to the recipients, so I can assure you such donations will reach their intended recipients.

### **The Vietnam Center Functions**

The Vietnam Center acts more or less as the operations center for the Vietnam project. We fund and guide the Vietnam Archive as part of our basic mission, and the head of the Vietnam Archive holds position as an Associate Director.

The Center also hosts annual conferences and every three years a major symposium. The annual meetings generally deal with a very specific and rather narrowly defined topic. Three weeks ago, for example, we hosted a conference that examined the Ngo Dinh Diem government, the Diem assassination, and its implications for the United States and Vietnam. That marked the fortieth anniversary of the assassination.

The triennial Vietnam Symposia—our 5th Triennial Symposium is scheduled for 2005—are much more widely ranging. For the last two symposia, the Vietnam Center sponsored active participation by representatives of the Hanoi government, and covered all expenses relating to that participation. In 1999, Lieutenant General Nguyen Dinh Uoc, then the Director of the Military History Institute (and still on active duty), appeared at our symposium and participated in a panel discussion with Admiral Zumwalt and a US

Army four-star general, William B. Rosson. In 2001, Counselor of State Luu Van Loi spoke, and he was accompanied by a junior official from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

I appreciate that these issues are still politically and emotionally charged; however, they won't go away. The better approach, we believe, is to confront them. Ask both sides to speak. Perhaps better to say, ask all sides to speak. There is only one basic requirement: that all who speak do so with respect toward each other. We have discovered that if each side gives the other just a chance to speak, a chance to interact in private meetings, too, then it is possible to come closer to understanding each other. And that is important.

The Vietnam Center also manages all interactions between Texas Tech University and Vietnamese government entities, including universities. We organize and conduct conferences and symposia, raise funds, and generally conduct the administration of the overall organization, which now includes a total of 35 staff, about half of which are full-time.

### **The Vietnam Archive**

The Vietnam Archive performs all archival functions: It receives donations of materials, processes them and takes all steps to preserve the materials in state-of-the-art facilities. The goal is to ensure these materials survive for future generations' use. This is a very labor-intensive operation. Much of the work is performed by graduate students

who have an interest in Vietnam; they are closely supervised by full-time professional staff.

I think we are at a critical time now for the preservation of records relating to Vietnam. Indeed, as I mentioned earlier, the older generation is rapidly passing from the scene. What will become of their papers, their memories of the events which had so traumatic an effect upon their lives—and for those from South Vietnam, their nation?

We are very fortunate, thanks to the efforts of Ambassador Bui Diem, to have managed to acquire a near-complete set of *Cong Bao Viet Nam Cong Hoa*, in essence, the *Congressional Record* of the Republic of Vietnam, and also a very extensive collection of the South Vietnamese government's official press releases for the war years. But what will become of the Hanoi archives? Will they survive? Will we ever have a complete accounting of these events?

At present, we are receiving donations of materials at a rate of nearly two daily. Last year, that rate was about one per day. These materials are processed, stored in acid-free folders in acid-free boxes and then stored in temperature-, humidity- and light-controlled spaces.

Beginning with a single collection of letters in 1989, and a cardboard box full of books, the Vietnam Archive has experienced steady, substantial growth. At present, the holdings include:

- 51,000 photographs and 35 mm slides
- 1100+ linear feet of documents
- 2000+ audiotapes, videotapes, CDs
- 1955 maps
- 6450 catalogued titles, with many thousands more not yet catalogued
- 13,600 newsletters and periodicals

### **The Virtual Vietnam Archive**

To access our materials, researchers might come to Texas Tech University, where individual boxes of documents will be brought to them in a bright and spacious research room. Increasingly, though, all of our non-copyrighted materials are becoming available on-line.

The Virtual Vietnam Archive project is designed to provide researchers world-wide free access to all of the non-copyrighted materials that we hold. We are very careful to protect the intellectual property rights of individuals and publishers; therefore, we must exercise care with the Virtual Vietnam Archive, as posting to the web is considered publication.

At present we have on-line over 750,000 pages of documentation, 51,000 photos and slides, 150 oral history interviews, 3,700 Vietnam veteran organization newsletters

and many other materials. The holdings grow daily as our staff continues scanning documents and posting them to the web.

The Virtual Vietnam Archive has become a very busy web site. Researchers accessed more than 500,000 pages of documents in 2002, our first full year of operations. We anticipate the numbers will be higher for 2003.

### **Vietnam Oral History Project**

Of course, much of the story of the Vietnam War is not contained in formal documents. Therefore, in 1998 the Vietnam Center initiated the Vietnam Oral History Project. At this point, the Oral History Project staff includes two full-time oral historians, four part-time transcribers, and a part-time secretary to handle the correspondence of the project.

We currently have about 1400 participants in the project, from 49 states and a dozen foreign countries, including Vietnam. Our oral historians can conduct their interviews in person or over the telephone. In either case, the interviews are recorded using digital technology, and then are transcribed. The subject of the interview then has the opportunity to review and edit the written record before it is posted to the web site. Researchers might read the interview, or, alternatively, can listen to the interview over the Internet, using streaming audio.

In order to enlist support from Vietnam veterans, the Vietnam Center sends representatives to Vietnam veteran group reunions whenever invited. Our representatives pay their own expenses, and seek only the opportunity to address each group about the Vietnam project, in order to encourage veterans to donate materials and oral histories to the Vietnam Center. In recent years, we have attended more than 100 veteran reunions. These reunions generally occur on weekends, which means that my staff spends a lot of free time away from home. It is a measure of their dedication that they do this cheerfully, and, indeed, it is difficult for me to get them to take compensatory time off during the regular working week.

The Vietnam Oral History Project is formally partnered with the Library of Congress's Veterans Oral History Project, and also cooperates with the Marine Corps Historical Center and the Navy Historical Foundation to transcribe and post to the web oral histories produced by these organizations.

### **The Vietnam Center Building**

The capstone of all of our efforts is to build at Texas Tech University a major Vietnam building. The concept has already been agreed to by the Board of Regents, and land has been allocated on the campus, though we have not yet located funding.

Essentially, this \$40 million, 150,000+ square foot facility will provide about 75,000 square feet of floor space for a major museum highlighting not just the war, but also the richness of Vietnamese history and culture. Our goal will be to educate visitors

not only about the war, but also about Vietnam, the country. And as for the war, we are firmly committed to depicting all involved in a positive and honorable way. Doubtless this will present many challenges; however, we believe that war participants who visit the museum will first examine how we have portrayed their role in it. If they find themselves (or their group) portrayed in a dignified way, then we hope their minds will be sufficiently opened to examine the other groups and thus to better understand the motivations and goals of all involved. The issues, of course, are very contentious. My personal idea is that if, at the end, everyone from every side hates me, we will have achieved balance.

So, one-half of the facility will be dedicated to a museum. The other half will house the Vietnam Archive, Vietnam Center, and facilities for Vietnam veteran organization reunions, as well as class rooms in which we will offer courses on the war for high schools as well as for university students.

With all these functions pulled together under one roof, we believe the Vietnam Project at Texas Tech will draw a remarkable level of donations of materials for preservation. And we believe, too, that the noble, balanced nature of this project will ensure that it continues to receive the state and federal funding that is necessary for its continued existence.

I am convinced that twenty or thirty years from now, when it comes time for me to retire, we will have built at Texas Tech University a facility that is universally

recognized as a national treasure: one that will inform the American people about the events of the 1960s and 1970s in Southeast Asia while actively working to improve the lot of the people in those countries affected by the war.

-----  
Dr. James R. Reckner is an associate professor of history at Texas Tech University. He is the founder of the Vietnam Center and is a retired naval officer who served two tours of duty as senior advisor with riverine forces of the South Vietnamese Navy.